

# **Symbolism of the Double-headed Eagle**

**30<sup>th</sup> Degree Essay**

**College of the Consistory**

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My exploration of the symbolism of the double-headed eagle started in 1999 when I joined the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry. Seeing the double-headed eagle displayed on the outer stage curtain during my Reunion, on hats worn by some members of the stage crew and on numerous printed materials naturally piqued my interest and led me to wonder and eventually to inquire about its meaning. The consensus response to my inquiry was that the double-headed eagle was simply an emblem of the Scottish Rite. To which I asked: but isn't it symbolic/emblematic of something within the Rite itself? The response was repeated that it is symbolic of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, itself. Oh, I replied and I then moved on to other matters.

But, as has come to happen to me in similar circumstances, one day five or six years later, my wife, Mary Ann asked me that what does the double-headed eagle stand for? From experience I knew I should tell the truth; but I didn't have the truth to tell. I also knew better than to simply wing-it as being the symbol of the Scottish Rite. I had been elected Wise Master at that same time and was reminded by Mary Ann that Wise Masters were supposed to know these things that weren't they? And, thus the first part of my journey began.

This was not my first journey into the deep Masonic woods and undergrowth in search of answers, for I had entered the College of the Consistory a few years before and had already put a few Degree essays under my belt. Knowing what little I did know, I began by composing a few questions. Why does the Scottish Rite use the double-headed eagle symbol? When did the Rite adopt this symbol? How did the symbol originate? Where? When? What was the original meaning attached to the symbol? And for good measure, I added a couple more: why don't my Brothers in the Rite have answers to these questions, and what do we know about an eagle's vision and eagle polycephaly?

Before I expended any effort towards finding answers to my questions, I sat down and examined a picture of the double-headed eagle and pondered it. I applied a disciplined wonder of sorts to see if I could find an answer without having to go beyond the chair I was seated in. Surely the double-headed eagle was symbolic of something; and, probably something special to the Rite. After all most everything else in Scottish Rite Masonry is symbolic.

What could it be? Then I remembered two things. The two struck me like lightning (the streak type, not heat lightning). First, I recalled that the Scottish Rite was established in Charleston, South Carolina in 1801, which was soon after the founding of our country. The eagle had become our national bird and was thus symbolic of our country that our people joined together in a single body of states. Could this naming of our national bird and its being emblematic of our people have influenced our Scottish Rite founders to have an eagle in their minds as a possible generic symbol for the Rite? I later learned that there seems to be no record of who chose the symbol or when. But, not knowing this at the time, I was content with my thought. So much for the animal; now, what about its having two heads? I spent quite a bit of time on this matter, but it was all in vain. I did recall Ill. Bro. Rex Hutchens's statement in his book, *A Bridge to Light* (1995 Edition, p.

284) that the double-headed eagle was symbolic of the past and future. This interpretation made sense, but I couldn't recall if it was his idea or if he had read it elsewhere during his years of study. Regardless, I was not content with that interpretation in any event, unless of course it was the official meaning attached to the double-headed eagle by the Rite itself. I pondered further and suddenly saw the second lightning strike. The two heads provided simultaneous views of the two worst potential enemies of the people of our country. The two heads were viewing organized religion and government. The two have enormous influences on human thinking and even existence and must always be kept separate from one another. They were deliberately separated at the beginning of our country, thus requiring two heads facing in opposite directions. It was a duty of Scottish Rite Masons to see that this separation was maintained. In fact separation of church and state is a creed of the Scottish Rite. That was it!

I continued off-and-on to study the symbolism of the double-headed eagle over the years and now again have taken the trail of exploration into the dark woods and undergrowth; but, I have never found a better reason for the double-headed eagle having become the symbol of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

What I have learned is reported here. Some details have been lost over the years and some answers were never found. This is always the case when you are plowing through brush ó once in awhile you find some berries and then sometimes you run into poison ivy. I learned something else, too ó there is considerable brush and undergrowth covering this subject along the information super highway.

Before examining what I learned, let's look at what I didn't learn. Referring back to my original list of questions: no one seems to know (with certainty) why the Scottish Rite uses the double-headed eagle symbol, when this use by the Rite began or by whom. We are left to draw our own conclusions; which is perhaps exactly what those founding members of the Scottish Rite had in mind. This is exactly what Albert Pike would have done. Take something that was obvious to him, put it at the head of the line and never explain why this had been done. This works well in practice because most will follow the banner and never be concerned about why it is the banner. Others who wonder will devise an answer that is agreeable to them and all will shoulder their muskets and march harmoniously (in step) with their Brothers.

One thing I did learn was that very few have truly researched the subject and there are many who are full of answers that they have obtained from the few. The whole notion of hearsay evidence is amply demonstrated in the Scottish Rite literature composed over two hundred years and several continents.

Over the years I have communicated (e-mailed) on the subject of the double-headed eagle with three individuals associated with the Scottish Rite: Ill. Bro. Rex Hutchens, Masonic author; Mrs. Joan Sansbury, Librarian at the house of the Temple and Bro. Phil Elam, KCCH, member of the Masonic Brotherhood of the Blue Forget-Me-Not. Mrs. Sansbury provided copies of two articles from the Masonic Encyclopedias by Coil and Mackey and

Bro. Elam searched (without success) for his copy of an English translation of M. Thureau Dangin's 1904 German paper that mentions the eagle of Lagash. Numerous websites have been visited, especially those in the U.S. and Canada.

The most definitive work on the double-headed eagle that I have found is titled: "The Double-Headed Eagle and Whence it Came," written by Arthur C. Parker of New York, printed in *The Builder Magazine*, Vol. IX, No.5, May, 1923 and published by the National Masonic Research Society. Bro. Parker's paper was especially important to me because it confirmed many of the fragments of information that I had previously gathered from elsewhere in both time and space. Bro. Parker's work is convincingly the source, though not always credited, for most of the Masonic writings related to the double-headed eagle.

From Bro. Parker's work (and the sources he cites) we learn that the double-headed eagle had its origin with the world's oldest civilization - the Sumerians, at a time some 5 to 6,000 years ago. We also learn that the double-headed eagle moved from Sumeria to Assyria, via the Hittites to Rome and thence throughout most all of Europe. From others we learn that the double-headed eagle was also copied for use in India and perhaps elsewhere in the far east. These travels took millennia to complete. There is no surprise that the symbol passed through Rome for "all roads lead there" or so we have been told.

There appears to be some confusion in the literature among the lion-headed eagle, the storm bird/eagle and the double-headed eagle. The carvings on stone cylinders found in Lagash now reside at the Louvre. I wrote to the Louvre asking for further information concerning the location of its find and a confirmation of my suspicion that the two heads were not identical. As readers may have expected, the French chose not to respond to my questions.

Some researchers believe that the Sumerians intended to convey the notion of two separate but equally powerful gods when carving the double-headed eagle (with its wings extended). By the time the symbol reached Rome researchers decided that the two heads were referring to vision towards the east and the west. (This is a somewhat curious notion given that the Empire also extended from the deep Sahara to the Arctic.) The Empire was also vaster before the double-headed eagle was adopted by Rome. A more important detail to recall is that Albert Pike wrote his *Magnum Opus* at the very time that the Sumerian civilization was first being excavated. And we know that Pike and other Masonic authors of his time did not mention Sumeria or recognize this first civilization in their works. Thus, we know that the double-headed eagle did not make its way directly from Sumeria to Charleston, S.C. or to the House of the Temple.

Other matters concerning the symbolism have intrigued me and still do. For one, what do we know about eagle polycephaly? There are examples of two headed pigs, calves, goats and sheep (all being domesticated and reproduced and observed in enormous numbers) and snakes and turtles. But I have found no reference to an actual two-headed eagle (or any other bird for that matter - has anyone seen a two headed chicken? Man has had opportunity to see such a freak of nature from having produced trillions of them.)

What do we know about an eagle's vision? I explored this with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. My questions concerned the angular field of view (is it 180° or slightly more or less) and what angular portion of the field of view is binocular? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service referred me to Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology, and they in turn referred me to the Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries at the University of Tennessee. No one seems to have the answers. I was also became acquainted with the SORA (Searchable Ornithological Research Archive).

On the matters most relevant to this essay, we know nothing really. What does the symbol represent? Who chose it, and when? Ill. Bro. Hutchens's idea that the single body represents time and the two heads view the past and the future is very good. As I recall from what remains of my notes and e-mails, this interpretation was entirely his and not confirmed by any documents.

Of course, I prefer my interpretation concerning separation of church and state. But there is no substantiation for this in the literature either. As I recall, Ill. Bro. Hutchens told me that he believed that the double-headed eagle was purely symbolic and that one was entirely free and encouraged to interpret it as he saw fit.

The double-headed eagle has been with man from the time of his invention of writing, if not before. And, mankind has used it continuously since then. The double-headed eagle forms a part of man's sculptured art, heraldry and vexillology. The origins of the symbol are not likely to be found with a freak of nature. Thus, it remains now exactly as it was when it came to be purely symbolic. Symbolic no doubt of many things to many people: of views into time and space, of opposites like good and evil and male and female, of equals such as gods and chiefs and perhaps of nothing more than an interesting idea that popped for no known reason, like lightning, into someone's mind. One thing is for sure: who ever had the idea to start with could never have dreamed or imagined that the symbol would still be in use today.